# On the Threshold Study Guide

## On the Threshold by Eugenio Montale

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# Contents

# Introduction

"On the Threshold" is a short lyric poem by the Nobel Prize—winning Italian poet Eugenio Montale. It was written in 1924 and published in 1925 in Italy as the first poem in Montale's *Ossi di seppia* (*The Bones of Cuttlefish*, 1983). The poem is also available in Montale's *Collected Poems: 1920—1954* (1998), translated and annotated by Jonathan Galassi; in *Eugenio Montale: Poems* (2000), edited by Harry Thomas; and in *Cuttlefish Bones: 1920—1927* (1992), translated by William Arrowsmith.

Taking some of its imagery from the Ligurian landscape of Montale's youth, "On the Threshold" is a poem about the need to live more fully and with greater freedom in the present, rather than be trapped in the stifling influence of the past. It is not only a plea for personal and spiritual freedom but perhaps also a call for a new type of poetry independent of the forms of the past. The poem is pessimistic in tone, however. While the poet urges his companion to make the leap to freedom, he appears unable to do so himself.

# Author Biography

Eugenio Montale was born October 12, 1896, in Genoa, Italy, the youngest of five children born to Domenico (a merchant) and Giuseppina (Ricci) Montale. Montale spent much of his childhood and adolescence at the family villa on the Ligurian coast, south of Genoa, a landscape that provides the setting for much of his early poetry. Montale attended schools in Genoa but did not pursue a university education. He voraciously read Italian and French literature, studied philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson, and began to write poetry. Montale also aspired to be an opera singer and took voice lessons from a retired baritone, Ernesto Sivori. During World War I, Montale served as an infantry officer on the Austrian front and later commanded a prisoner-of-war camp. In 1923, after the death of Sivori, Montale abandoned his singing ambitions. Two years later, his first collection of poems, *Ossi di seppia* (*The Bones of Cuttlefish*, 1983; republished in a new translation as *Cuttlefish Bones: 1920—1927*, 1992), was published, which includes the poem "On the Threshold." At this time, Montale also began to write literary essays for various publications.

In 1927, Montale moved to Florence, where he worked for a publishing house. The following year, he was appointed curator of the Gabinetto Vieusseux Library, a position he held until 1938, when he was fired because he was not a member of the Fascist Party. After this, Montale made his living as a freelance writer, translator, and critic. His volume of poetry *Le occasioni* (*The Occasions*, 1987) was published in 1939. Montale translated into Italian such writers as William Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, Herman Melville, Eugene O'Neill, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and others.

After World War II, Montale moved to Milan, where he became editor of *Corriere della Sera*, an influential daily newspaper. During the 1950s, he wrote over a hundred articles a year, also becoming music and opera critic of *Corriere d'Informazione* in 1954. He reportedly never missed an opening night at La Scala, an opera house in Milan. In 1956, Montale published another book of poems, *La bufera e altro* (*The Storm and Other Poems*, 1978; translated by Arrowsmith as *The Storm and Other Things*, 1986).

In 1958, Montale married Drusilla Tanzi, his companion of nearly thirty years. She had been in ill health for a long time and died in 1963.

In 1967, President Giuseppe Saragat deemed Montale a member-for-life of the Italian Senate. A collection of five poems, *Satura*, was published in 1962, and expanded in 1971 as *Satura: 1962—1970*. Montale also published diaries, *Diario del '71 e del '72* (1973) and *Diario di Quattro Annini* (1977). In 1975, Montale won the Nobel Prize in literature. He also received honorary degrees from the University of Milan, the University of Rome, Cambridge University, Basel University, and Nice University. He was made an honorary citizen of Florence in 1977. Montale's *L'opera in versi* was published in 1980 (*Collected Poems, 1920—1954*, 1998), a year before his death. Montale died September 12, 1981, of heart failure, in Milan.

# Plot Summary

## Stanza 1

"On the Threshold" is addressed to an unnamed interlocutor, "you," in a walled orchard or garden. Montale later wrote that the companion he addressed was a woman, although this is not apparent in the poem itself. The poem begins with the speaker telling his companion to "Be happy" if there is a wind in the orchard that carries with it "the tidal surge of life." The wind is a metaphor (a word or phrase used in place of another word or phrase, suggesting a likeness between the two) for a fresh wave of life, untainted by the past. Otherwise, the orchard is just a "dead web / of memories" that is not really a garden at all but a "reliquary." A reliquary is a small box or chest in which relics are kept and shown, and a relic is something from the past that is kept as a memento or souvenir. The orchard becomes a symbol of an enclosed, imprisoning kind of life, and the stanza as a whole conveys the idea of being trapped in the deadness of the past. Some new influx of life is needed in order to lift the poet and his companion beyond the past.

## Stanza 2

This stanza takes up the idea of the wind as a metaphor for creativity and life. The whirring sound the person in the garden is hearing is not "flight" (that is, not something in the orchard moving away) but something "stirring" from within the "eternal womb"□a breath of new life, unconnected to the dead web of the past. This new breath of life has the power to transform the orchard, now described as a "solitary strip of land." The word "solitary" conveys a sense of being isolated from the rest of life. The new breath of life has the power to "transform" the strip of land "into a crucible." A crucible is a vessel that can resist extreme heat and is used for melting ores and metals. The word "crucible" can also mean, as it does in the poem, a severe test or trial. The nature of that trial is explained, or at least hinted at, in the next stanza.

## Stanza 3

The speaker describes what is beyond the steep or sheer wall of the orchard as a "fury." He does not elaborate, but the word fury means a violent anger or wild rage. It likely refers to the tempestuous nature of life itself, with its potential for great destruction. The speaker goes on to say that if the person within the garden manages to "move forward," out of the deadening web of sterile memories and, presumably, into the fury, he or she may be "save[d]" by an encounter with a "phantom." The speaker gives no details of what this phantom might be, or of what the person might be saved from, other than, in a general sense, the destructive, imprisoning aspects of life. The process appears to be a mysterious, even supernatural one. In line 4, the speaker suggests that this moment is of pivotal importance for human life: "histories are shaped here." In other words, such

moments of transformation have the power to determine future events. The last line of the stanza seems to strike a note of pessimism. Whatever deeds are done as a result of the encounter will not survive for long because "the endgame of the future will dismantle" them. This suggests a kind of historical determinism in which the future will eventually undo whatever positive actions humans are able to achieve.

## Stanza 4

In the last stanza, the speaker gives three firm instructions to the person he is addressing. This person must look for a way out of the "net" of the past that "binds" not only him or her but the poet too (and, presumably, everyone else). The word "net" in this stanza refers back to the "web" of stanza 1. The task is obviously not going to be easy, since the net binds tightly, and the person must "burst through" it and "break free," which seems to call for great effort. Line 3 continues with the simple instruction, "Go," as if the speaker is issuing an order. The speaker then says he has prayed that the person may be able to escape in this way. He seems to believe that for himself no escape is possible, but he will feel less bitter and angry knowing that this special person, whose relationship to the speaker is never specified, has succeeded in escaping.

# Themes

Although the orchard could, geographically speaking, be anywhere, in many of the poems in the collection *Cuttlefish Bones*, Montale drew on the landscape close to his family villa, which was situated in a very secluded spot on the Ligurian coast. Montale spent long summer holidays at the villa, and he is quoted by editor Jonathan Galassi in Montale's *Collected Poems: 1920—1954* as saying that the seclusion he experienced there led "to introversion, to an imprisonment in the cosmos." This comment provides a clue to the theme of the poem, as does the fact that Montale intended this poem to sum up, or possibly act as an overture to, the collection as a whole. Also relevant is the fact that the original title of the poem was "Liberty."

The theme of imprisonment and freedom can be understood at several levels. The poet may be making a plea for freedom from the restraints of old poetic forms. The goal of breaking through the "net" and the "dead web" would then be part of a search for a new and original poetic language, something Montale was seeking at the time he was writing the poems in *Cuttlefish Bones*. He wanted to respond to earlier Italian poets such as Gabriele D'Annunzio, who in a collection published in 1903 also wrote about the Ligurian coast, but used very different language and themes.

The poem is also an appeal for personal and spiritual freedom. The speaker feels that he is imprisoned in a condition of stasis, unable to act in a free manner, unconditioned by the oppressive weight of the past. He longs to be free of this stasis, which he equates with being condemned or damned, in contrast to the salvation he believes is possible□at least for his companion. According to George Talbot, in a note to "On the Threshold" in an Italian edition of Montale's *Selected Poems*, salvation is "an ambiguous term which . . . would seem to connote a capacity to enjoy a fulness of life, undisturbed by doubt and uncertainty." This is no doubt true, but the term also seems to require a more metaphysical explanation. The poem states that salvation may come through an encounter with a mysterious "phantom." The phantom appears to represent a moment of experience beyond time and space, beyond the net of history or of personal and collective experience. It cannot be described in terms any more concrete than this insubstantial phantom, but it is a moment in which life is completely altered: the static, inward-looking garden becomes a dynamic, transformative crucible that opens up new possibilities for human experience.

The poet implies in the final stanza that in order to experience such a moment, diligence, persistence, and effort are required. The net of conditioned, limited existence that binds people has gaps in it ("flaws"); these must be searched out, for within the texture of such gaps lies, it would appear, a freer state of being. The process of becoming free does not appear to be an easy one, given the image of the crucible in stanza 2. It is as if humans must pass through the fire in order to assert or gain their freedom.

For himself, the speaker appears to have given up hope of freedom; he can only wish it for his friend (or perhaps, for the reader, to whom the "you" in the poem might also

refer). This gives the poem a pessimistic flavor. Although a state of freedom can be envisioned, it seems to involve the renunciation of life by one person in favor of another.

# Style

One of the problems a translator faces is how to preserve in a new language as much of the form and structure of the original poem as possible. Often the task is virtually impossible, especially with the use of rhyme. In the original Italian, "On the Threshold" is consistently rhymed. In the first stanza, for example, at the end of line 1, *pomario* (orchard) rhymes both with *morto* (dead) at the end of line 3, and with *reliquiario* (reliquary) at the end of line 5. The other stanzas also have distinctive patterns of rhyme. But the rhymes cannot easily be translated into English, and the translator makes no attempt to do so. The result is that the English version reads like a poem written in free verse.

However, other aspects of the original poem are preserved, including meaning, line and stanza length, and punctuation. As in the original, the poem is made up of four stanzas. Stanzas 1 and 3 are five lines each, and stanzas 2 and 4 are four lines each.

The poem is notable for its use of grammatical imperatives. An imperative is the mood of a verb that expresses a command or exhortation, as in "Be happy" in the first stanza, and "Look," "burst through," "break free," and "Go" in the last stanza.

There is also some use made of alliteration (repetition of initial consonants) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) in the English version that is not present in the Italian original. In stanza 1, for example, the monosyllabic phrase "dead web" falls with an appropriate thud, which is helped by the assonance of the successive "e" sounds. In stanza 2, "whir" is linked through alliteration to "womb" in the next line, which reinforces the meaning of the lines. In line 3, the alliteration of the "s" sounds in "solitary strip" brings attention to the garden seen in yet another light.

# Historical Context

## Hermeticism

According to Joseph Cary in *Three Modern Italian Poets*, there was a "national poetic renaissance" beginning in the 1910s in Italy, associated with the work of Umberto Saba and Giuseppe Ungaretti, and later with Montale and Salvatore Quasimodo. Ungaretti was the leader of what came to be known as the hermetic school of poetry. It was so named because the poets of this school wrote in an obscure style, using highly symbolic and subjective language that others found hard to penetrate. (The term "hermetic" derives from alchemy and refers to something that is completely sealed.)

The roots of hermeticism lie in the French symbolist poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarme, and Valery, but some of the obscurity is in part because in the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, the Fascist Party controlled literary and artistic expression, which meant poets were not always able to openly speak their minds in their work. Glauco Cambon, in his introduction to *Eugenio Montale: Selected Poems*, notes that Montale's poems written in the 1920s "register political despondency, though they do so by mere implication." Because the poems were written "under the shadow of tightening dictatorship . . . they denounce this predicament by seeing through the official buoyancy to a threatening paralysis," writes Cambon. Montale himself was quietly antifascist, and in the late 1920s in Florence, he associated with writers and intellectuals who were involved with the antifascist journal *Solaria*. Although Montale was labeled a hermetic poet by critics in the 1930s, he denied that he cultivated obscurity and that he was a member of any poetic school.

As a result of the difficult nature of their work, the hermetic poets were not widely known outside Italy. Cary notes the term "hermeticism" is of little importance anyway. He argues in *Three Modern Italian Poets* that it survives "as an ironic banner for admirers, a catch-all for literary historians." Certainly, after World War II, each of the three poets chiefly associated with hermeticism□Ungaretti, Montale, and Quasimodo□developed distinctive styles and themes that had little in common with one another.

## Modernism

During the 1920s, the literary movement known as modernism gathered strength. The roots of modernism are found in the late nineteenth century, a period during which established beliefs about religion and society were questioned. This process was accelerated by World War I. The war dealt a death blow to complacent beliefs in human progress and undermined the sense of order and stability in Western culture. It seemed to many as if the fundamental values that Western civilization had stood for were breaking up. Because of this new mood of disillusionment, writers felt compelled to make a radical break with the past. They rejected the traditional and conventional and experimented with new forms and styles. In poetry, the fragmented structure of T. S.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) was representative of modernism, as was the work of Ezra Pound. In novels, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) undermined traditional narrative continuity by employing a stream-of-consciousness technique, as did Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Many modernist writers felt themselves to be members of an avant-garde whose task it was to subvert bourgeois conventions and force readers into questioning their basic assumptions.

# Critical Overview

Montale's collection *Cuttlefish Bones*, in which "On the Threshold" appears, was an immediate critical success on its Italian publication in 1925. Leading Italian literary critics hailed Montale as an important new poet. According to Rebecca J. West, writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*:

The young poet's muted yet powerful "counter-eloquence" . . . met with widespread approval, especially at that moment in Italian culture, when Fascist bombast proliferated and the spiritual malaise of many was being smothered by declarations of certainty, prosperity, and optimism.

Recognition and appreciation of Montale's work in the English-speaking world came more slowly. Although the first translation into English of a poem by Montale was published in T. S. Eliot's journal *Criterion* in 1928, it was not until the 1960s that English translations became widely available. During the 1970s, a marked increase of critical essays on Montale's poetry could be seen. This trend was further stimulated by Montale's Nobel Prize in literature awarded in 1975.

"On the Threshold" has often attracted interest since critics see it as embodying in seed form many of the themes that Montale elaborated throughout his poetic career. This is noted by G. Singh in *Eugenio Montale: A Critical Study of His Poetry, Prose, and Criticism*. Singh writes of "On the Threshold," "The typically Montalian landscape is outlined with dynamic vividness." Singh mentions the symbolism associated with the images of wind, wall, garden, and net. "The wall," Singh notes as an example, "is a recurrent feature in the Montalian landscape, symbolizing something predetermined, static, and unchangeable, just as the wind and water symbolize change, movement, transformation, and occasionally salvation." Another critic, Joseph Cary, in *Three Modern Italian Poets*, discusses the unpredictable, random nature of the salvation described in stanza 3 of "On the Threshold": "the verb *imbattersi* means 'bump into' or 'fall in with' and suggests, augmented by the adverb *forse* (perhaps, maybe), mere happenstance." Guido Almansi and Bruce Merry, in *Eugenio Montale: The Private Language of Poetry*, also comment on Montale's concept of salvation. They point out that in "On the Threshold" the poet delegates the responsibility for salvation to his interlocutor, designated as "you." Almansi and Merry interpret this "you" as the reader

who has to find a way out from the white space at the end of a poem. The adventure begins in the types that form the printed composition, but the final solution lies beyond them.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century poetry. In this essay, Aubrey discusses how other poems in Montale's book* Cuttlefish Bones *shed light on the themes of "On the Threshold."*

Montale is generally regarded as a difficult, rather obscure poet who does not make interpretation easy for his reader. "On the Threshold" is no exception to this rule. It is a mysterious poem that hints at much more than it explains but, fortunately for the reader, whose interest is piqued by this glimpse into Montale's interior world, Montale tends to repeat his themes (imprisonment/freedom, salvation, memory) and images (wall, water); a reading of the other poems that make up the collection *Cuttlefish Bones* sheds considerable light on the poetic universe that Montale inhabited in the early stages of his long poetic career. It is easy to see why "On the Threshold" is so often seen as an introduction to the collection as a whole.

The resigned, pessimistic tone of "On the Threshold," in which the speaker's passion is roused only by the prospect of someone else's escape from a seemingly dead, enclosing world, is typical of Montale's stance in many of these poems. Montale seems passive, almost frozen into inactivity by the weight of the oppression he feels and the fear of the consequences of any positive activity. He also feels set apart from others. As he writes in "Mediterranean":

I was different: a brooding man

who sees the turbulence of fleeting life

in himself, in others□who's slow to take

the action no one later can undo.

The last line suggests a determinism that is also apparent in "On the Threshold" ("deeds / the endgame of the future will dismantle"), the feeling that whatever action is taken now not only cannot be offset or modified by any future action but also has no power to alter the eventual outcome, whatever that might be.

In this severely circumscribed, almost tortured universe ("bleak limbo of maimed existences" from "Mediterranean"), the image of a forbidding wall keeps appearing, suggesting the barrier that separates such fractured beings from whatever they might otherwise be. In the short lyrics that compose the "Cuttlefish Bones" section of the collection appear these lines addressed to an unidentified interlocutor: "Sit the noon out, pale and lost in thought / beside a blistering garden wall." Later in the poem, Montale continues:

feel with sad amazement

that all life and its torment

consists in following along a wall

with broken bottle shards embedded in the top.

The wall in this passage recalls the "sheer wall" of the orchard in "On the Threshold." There does not seem to be much chance of escape from a world such as this, and the speaker often seems resigned to his stern fate as a man permanently and irrevocably out of harmony with his environment. This deeply entrenched pessimism cannot wholly beat out the imagined possibility of some transforming event□epiphany would be too strong a word□coming along to smash down, at least for a moment, the wall that encloses and stifles the heart. Something in the constitution of the speaker will not allow him to remain entirely dormant, passively accepting the imprisoning status quo. The moment when this impulse of life asserts itself seems to be quite beyond his conscious willing; it happens when it happens and that is all that can be said about it, at least from the evidence of this lyric poem from the "Cuttlefish Bones" section of the collection:

My life, I ask of you no stable

contours, plausible faces, property.

Now in your restless circling, wormwood and honey

have the same savor.

The heart that disdains all motion

occasionally is convulsed by a jolt.

As sometimes the stillness of the country

sounds with a rifle shot.

Whatever the burden it bears, human life cannot be entirely squashed. The inert heart that unexpectedly receives a jolt that brings it back to life is a parallel to the creative wind that the speaker hopes will cause some movement in the static garden of "On the Threshold." In both cases, the possibility of revival reasserts itself when all seems dead.

Montale often refers to this moment when new life streams in, against all the odds, as the "miracle." It is the moment referred to in "On the Threshold" in terms of encountering the apparition or "phantom." Montale did not mean the word "miracle" in the religious sense; for him, the miracle was when something wholly unexpected, beyond what could have been predicted in that "restless circling" of the wheel of life, disturbs the mundane, time-space world and opens up some entirely new way of perceiving:

Maybe one morning, walking in dry, glassy air,

I'll turn, and see the miracle occur:

nothing at my back, the void

behind me, with a drunkard's terror.

A profound perceptual shift is envisioned here, as the world for a moment disappears altogether, and the speaker has an experience□a very unsettling one□of the "void" that lies behind all temporal phenomena. It is as if a person watching a film sees for the first time the white screen on which all the images that normally hold his attention are projected. Montale takes up the image of the movie screen in the following verse from the poem quoted above. After the moment of the miracle passes, "as if on a screen, trees houses hills / will suddenly collect for the usual illusion." The speaker will at least have seen that the way he usually perceives the world is not the only way, and that the "void" is somehow truer than the illusions of so-called normal perception. It should be noted here that the speaker is not recording an experience he actually had; he is merely imagining that at some point he may experience something of this nature. Montale is not a mystic or a seer; he is no William Blake, living in worlds far more exalted than those of ordinary men. He is, at least in his poetic persona, largely confined to the prison of everyday perception and the conditioned rather than the free life. There is always something tentative about his attempts to "burst through" the net that binds, as he put it in "On the Threshold." Clodagh J. Brook, in *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry: Metaphor, Negation, and Silence*, has commented on the uncertainty of salvation (which is linked to Montale's concept of the "miracle") in Montale's poems. It is often qualified by the word "maybe," or "perhaps," as in "On the Threshold." In each case the Italian word is *forse*, and Montale's use of this word, Brook points out, "is confined to a putative metaphysical world that cannot be directly perceived by the senses and which is thus covered in a blanket of doubt, its existence removed from positive assertion and certainty."

Perhaps most revealing for an elaboration of themes hinted at in "On the Threshold" is the poem "Chrysalis," which was written in the same year (1924) as "On the Threshold." Like so many of Montale's poems, "Chrysalis" is addressed to an absent female companion who inspires the speaker, and for whom he wishes a salvation that is not available for himself, or which he renounces in her favor. He imagines the moment in which such salvation will happen; it is a moment beyond time and memory:

Now you stare down at the soil;

an undertow of memories

reaches your heart and almost overwhelms it.

A shout in the distance: see, time plummets,

disappears in hurried eddies

among the stones, all memory gone; and I

from my dark lookout reach

for this sunlit occurrence.

Memory always seems to have negative connotations in Montale's poems, as in "On the Threshold," in which the "dead web / of memories" sink and are annihilated by the "tidal surge of life." It is as if salvation consists in the mind emptying itself of all past and present content. Although Montale never formulates the concept in exactly this Buddhist-sounding manner, he was familiar with the work of Arthur Schopenhauer, the nineteenth-century German philosopher whose major work *The World as Will and Representation* (1819) was heavily influenced by Buddhist and Hindu concepts.

Also to be noted about the above quotation from "Chrysalis" is the fact that the images that occur in "On the Threshold" are repeated: there is a contrast between water, which flows, and stone, which is hard and opaque and which suggests the ubiquitous Montalian wall, now broken and breached by the "hurried eddies" of water, the equivalent of the "tidal surge of life" in "On the Threshold."

This is only an imagined experience for someone else; the speaker himself remains in darkness, and as "Chrysalis" continues, the pessimism deepens. The image of the wall returns and even the possibility of freedom seems to be denied, although once again Montale's characteristic use of the word "maybe" gives the deterministic statement a speculative rather than a definitive air:

Ah chrysalis, how bitter

is this nameless torture that envelops us

and spirits us away□

till not even our footprints last in the dust;

and we'll go on, not having moved

a single stone in the great wall;

and maybe everything is fixed, is written,

and we'll never see it come our way:

freedom, the miracle,

the act that wasn't sheer necessity!

From this state of bleak resignation, Montale can envision only one hope. Speaking of the "pact" he wants to make with "destiny," Montale restates the ideal of renunciation that runs consistently through his poetry:

to redeem

your joy through my condemning.

This is the hope that still lives in my heart;

after which all motion ceases.

And I think of the unspoken offerings that prop up

the houses of the living; of the heart that abdicates

so an unsuspecting child may laugh;

If the speaker cannot redeem himself, he can, as compensation, participate in a mysterious cosmic trading of blessings and curses, whereby the self-sacrifice of one can allow another to live or to feel joy. Underlying this is the notion of limitation, of lack of abundance. There is not enough joy to go around. It must be carefully rationed out, as if it were food in a famine. If one person has it, another may be deprived of it, like scarce goods in a struggling economy. In *Poet in Our Time*, Montale writes a telling comment, in the context of technological progress, about the emotional resources available to humans: "every gain, every advance made by man is accompanied by equivalent losses in other directions, while the sum total of possible human happiness remains the same." Given this context, Montale's poetic act of self-abnegation□allowing another to attain what he cannot attain for himself, however much he desires it□becomes a noble sentiment, as well as being a kind of personal fulfillment by proxy. It is entirely consistent with the limited, enclosed, imprisoning nature of Montale's poetic world.

Finally, there is the poem "House by the Sea," which like many other poems in *Cuttlefish Bones* draws on the landscape of the Ligurian coastline to create an internal world full of sadness and a sense of frustrated hope. The poem also recapitulates the now familiar themes of renunciation and escape in a tone that is every bit as pessimistic as "Chrysalis."

The central metaphor in "House by the Sea" is that of a journey that has been completed, ending on a beach. Images of the dead heart and the prison of endless time give way to a description of the mist that shrouds the view, blocking out the islands of Corsica and Capraia. The speaker then addresses, as in "On the Threshold" and "Chrysalis," his female companion, who on this occasion seems to be physically present at the scene, rather than merely imagined by the speaker. Although the biographical details are not especially important, Montale scholars identify this female figure as having been inspired by a young woman named Anna degli Uberti (1904—1959), whom Montale knew during the summers of 1919—1923.

The companion inquires of the speaker whether the world of time is all that exists. In response, the speaker gives his most explicit description of both the clash between hope and reality and his reaction to it, to which he has alluded in so many other poems, such as in his poem "Chrysalis." The final two lines of this poem suggest another layer of sad irony. The female figure to whom the speaker speaks does not hear him. The very one for whom Montale's poetic persona would make what for him would be the ultimate sacrifice has her attention elsewhere. It appears that even communication with

the dearest one is doomed to failure. But the speaker tries to make the best of it, lifting himself to an optimism about her fate that he cannot feel for his own: "Maybe your nearby heart that doesn't hear me / already has set sail for the eternal" ("Chrysalis").

The watery image of setting sail for the eternal recalls the "tidal surge of life" in "On the Threshold," a poem which, in light of the foregoing, is well described as an overture to *Cuttlefish Bones*. "Perpetually on the threshold" is a phrase that accurately describes this poet in whom pessimism struggles with hope, who waits for the miracle that never comes, at least not for himself. For Montale, miracles are only for others. He must continue to live in his prison and try to "see through the bars" ("Chrysalis").

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "On the Threshold," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

# Topics for Further Study

Do people tend to focus more on the past and the future than on the present? How can people live more spontaneously in the present? Write an essay supporting your answers.

Write a paragraph or two about an experience you have had in which you felt completely free. What were you doing? Do you associate such experiences with childhood or adulthood?

Read "Ode to the West Wind" by Percy Bysshe Shelley and compare it with "On the Threshold." Write an essay comparing the similarities or differences in structure, mood, diction, and content between the poems.

Research the poetry from a certain literary period—for example, the English Renaissance, the Victorian period, or the postmodern period—and report on the following questions: How did people in that time period perceive poetry? Why did they write poetry and why did people read it? What did poetry contribute to life that might otherwise have been overlooked? What place did poetry and poets have in that society?

# Compare and Contrast

**1920s:** Europe is still recovering from the devastation of World War I. The Fascist movement is on the rise in Italy, where Benito Mussolini takes power in 1922. In 1926, Mussolini solidifies his power, bans opposition, and establishes a single-party dictatorship. In 1932 in Germany, Adolf Hitler leads his Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, for which he receives a nine-month prison sentence. During his imprisonment, he writes his famous book *Mein Kampf* (1925).

**Today:** Germany and Italy have long overcome their totalitarian past and are democratic nations. They are both members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO; the Western military alliance) and the European Union (founded to enhance political, economic, and social cooperation among European nations).

**1920s:** The League of Nations, founded after World War I, aims to enforce the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war; to prevent new wars from breaking out; to promote disarmament; and to deal with international problems such as refugees and infectious diseases. The league has only limited success since powerful nations often feel free to defy it.

**Today:** The United Nations is the much larger successor of the League of Nations. Founded in 1945, after World War II, the United Nations, which began with 51 members in 1945, has 191 members as of 2002. Its purpose is to maintain international peace and security; to achieve international cooperation in solving economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems; and to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Like the League of Nations, the United Nations has had only limited success in preventing wars or bringing them to an end.

**1920s:** There is widespread pessimism regarding the foundations of Western civilization and culture following the unprecedented scale of slaughter during World War I. The belief in inevitable progress through science and technology is shattered. The new mood known as modernism is expressed by poets and writers such as James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, who experiment with new forms and styles to express the contemporary confusion and disorder.

**Today:** Modernism has been superseded by postmodernism, a term applied to works written after World War II that subvert modernist techniques that had themselves become conventional. Postmodernists mix styles and genres and often eliminate the distinction between high and low culture. Some postmodernism is based on the idea that it is impossible to find meaning in life. Even language is indeterminate and cannot yield absolute meaning. Postmodernists take the view that there are no moral or ideological absolutes.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The New Italian Poetry, 1945 to the Present: A Bilingual Anthology* (1981), edited by Lawrence R. Smith, is a substantial anthology featuring the most important Italian poets since World War II.

*A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943—1988* (2003), by Paul Ginsborg, has been hailed by reviewers as the best single work on postwar Italian history. It comprehensively covers a period of unprecedented economic, social, and demographic change in Italy.

*The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (1999), edited by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, is a comprehensive survey of hundreds of years of Italy's literary tradition. All quotations are translated into English, and the book includes maps, chronological charts, and up-to-date bibliographies.

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) was published at about the same time as Montale's *Cuttlefish Bones*, and the two poets are often compared. *The Waste Land* expresses the sense of dislocation and spiritual aridity that followed the shock experienced by Western civilization as a result of World War I.

# Further Study

Becker, Jared, *Eugenio Montale*, Twayne's World Authors Series, No. 778, Twayne, 1986.

Becker's introductory study surveys the entirety of Montale's work. It includes a chronology and an annotated bibliography.

Cambon, Glauco, *Eugenio Montale's Poetry: A Dream in Reason's Presence*, Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 3—33.

This is an analysis of *Cuttlefish Bones*, emphasizing Montale's poetic attempt to reclaim the lost bliss of childhood. In the book, Cambon sees Montale as "wavering between utter disenchantment and glimpsed ecstasy."

Huffman, Claire de C. L., *Montale and the Occasions of Poetry*, Princeton University Press, 1983.

This study of Montale's poetry emphasizes *The Occasions*, Montale's second volume, as a lens through which to understand the whole of his work. Huffman also includes a comparison between Montale and T. S. Eliot.

Montale, Eugenio, *The Second Life of Art: Selected Essays of Eugenio Montale*, edited and with an introduction by Jonathan Galassi, Ecco Press, 1982.

This is the most comprehensive collection in English of Montale's prose works.

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Almansi, Guido, and Bruce Merry, *Eugenio Montale: The Private Language of Poetry*, Edinburgh University Press, 1977, pp. 6—7.

Brook, J. Clodagh, *The Expression of the Inexpressible in Eugenio Montale's Poetry: Metaphor, Negation, and Silence*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 99.

Cambon, Glauco, "Eugene Montale: An Introduction," in *Eugenio Montale: Selected Poems*, New Directions, 1966, p. xiii.

Cary, Joseph, *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale*, New York University Press, 1969, pp. 235—329.

Galassi, Jonathan, ed., "Notes," in *Collected Poems: 1920—1954*, by Eugenio Montale, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999, p. 443.

Montale, Eugenio, *Poet in Our Time*, translated by Alastair Hamilton, Marion Boyars, 1976, p. 22.

Singh, G., *Eugenio Montale: A Critical Study of His Poetry, Prose, and Criticism*, Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 19—20.

Talbot, George, ed., "Notes," in *Selected Poems*, by Eugenio Montale, UCD Foundation for Italian Studies, 2000, p. 40.

West, Rebecca J., "Eugenio Montale," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 114, *Twentieth-Century Italian Poets, First Series*, edited by Giovanna Wedel De Stasio, Glauco Cambon, and Antonio Illiano, Gale Research, 1992, pp. 135—48.